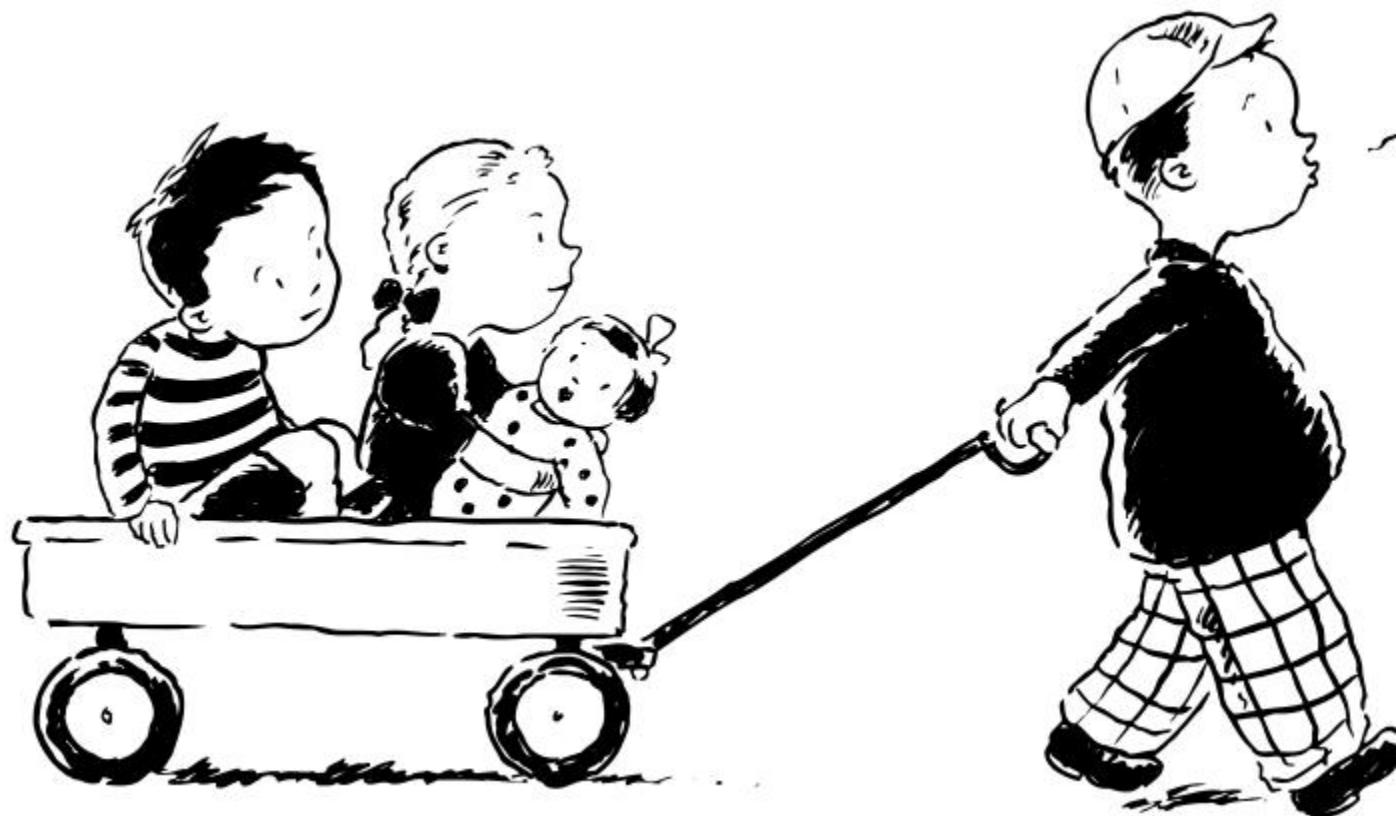


NEW TOOLS IN COMMUNICATION

NARRATIVE PROCEDURES WITH CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES USING EXPRESSIVE ARTS TO DESCRIBE THEIR SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCES

Many Ways Children Express Needs, Wants, and Desires Through Stories

Solely talking about a problem or expressing life experiences in heartfelt ways can be an opportunity to open up and engage actively in verbal conversation. Many children prefer to express themselves in more ways than just sitting and talking. Children with language learning problems may require other favored modalities to express themselves. Many children capable of verbal expression would often like to communicate in different ways and usually appreciate being offered various forms of expression. Painting, puppets, or other nonverbal means can be used to express themselves. If they are not provided with alternative means of expression, the unique voices of certain disabled persons may be silenced and may be excluded from any conversation about their unique, daily ways of being.

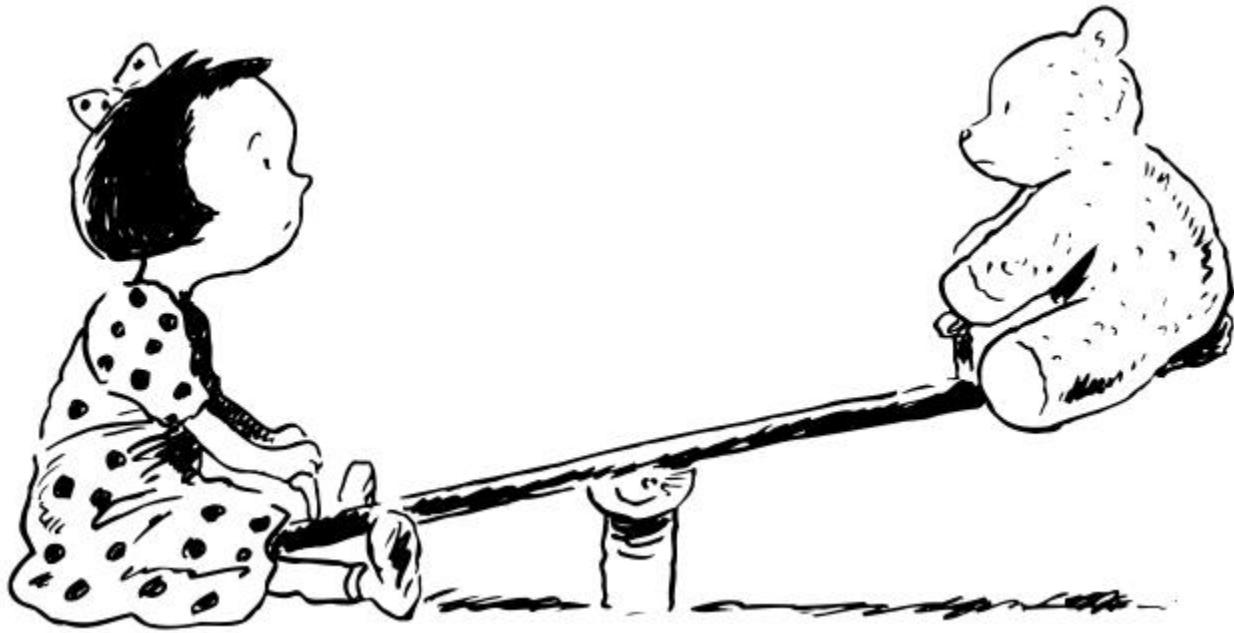


Show, Not Tell, Significant Experiences

Play and expressive art modalities help children communicate who are not very verbal. Favoring non-verbal modalities of communication could include children who are reluctant to speak, are too shy, are from another nationality and speak English as a second language, have language-based disabilities, or who are just too young to speak. Some kids may be primarily visual or kinesthetic processors for whom art or dance will be the preferred means of expression. There are those who have experienced emotional neglect and abuse who have impaired verbal expression at certain times; for example, some kids, due to threats made during psychological trauma, may be unable to talk freely. Also, there are culturally-different families with a diverse style or cultural expressions where parents have predetermined ways about the way their children should act or talk.

Some parents expect their child to communicate with any authority figure which may result in social inhibition such as limited eye contact or polite, cursory answers. Listeners may then query about such customs regarding the child as how best to respect them or about possibilities for altering what they say in more honorable ways. We might, for example, encourage the child in her polite behavior and ask the parents if it might be a good idea for the child to communicate with drawings, a journal, theater, or dance and, if appropriate, attach words to what they say with their artful expressions. Emotionally-distraught children who have problems may not want to express themselves in words yet they may communicate nonverbally, rejecting their experience with facial expressions, posture, and movements. To what extent should we keep trying to verbally engage young children who are immersed in such experience? Most communication in this way is the foundation for healthy relationships. These nonverbal expressions are the scaffolding for using the visual arts and expressive arts in building positive communication.

Information about problems may be lodged at a body level even when it is barely within the child's conscious awareness. Nonverbal encounters offer alternative means of communicating while organizing one's experience in the above situations.



Visual Expression as a Storied Experience

Learning and communicating unfold children's early development using the social context, even without oral language. In working with young children without language, at this time a lot of nonverbal feelings, needs, and beliefs will need to be communicated. As young children become verbal, more and more sensory input is organized by the brain into pre-narrative forms using early, biologically-based grammar inherent in the child. The events might be storied through sight, sound, and/or movement at this early time where the plot unfolds and explains events through words, perhaps at a later time.

Children's complexities of perceiving and making sense of the world are revealed through these visual expressions. If we limit our conception of what we do in life to what is storied in words, by ignoring the functional, biological, and sensory motor, we compromise the whole experience of the mind and body. This limited conception may slip into reductive or simplistic parts, forgetting the whole. Lived experience, including the richness of relationships, perception and meanings of visual symbolic processes including feelings, emotions, and kinesthetic sensations may accurately represent the "map of the actual territory." Using expressive arts, practices that

directly engage auditory, visual, and kinesthetic senses as well as feelings, may more capture the total enriched experience. New dimensions of the experience arise that are aesthetically sparkling when we pay attention to nonverbal expressions through the arts that mediate promoting the senses.

Children and whole families can be invited to develop narrative conversations and family stories using the expressive arts and competitive and cooperative games with media, such as: drawing or painting, cartoons, poetry, journal-writing, sculpting, guiding, fantasy, charts, maps, sand tray, dramatic play with puppets, children's literature, dress-ups, role play, drama therapy, movement, sports, mime, or mask-making.



Externalization and Narrative Construction

People do not have to be an artist or trained in the use of expressive arts to communicate in narrative ways. Behaviors to broaden expression can be incorporated in everyday life. For example, many children can be invited to show problems or counter the problems using strengths and resourceful ideas in graphic form by drawing or doodling or using cartoons. You do not need to be specifically trained in expressive arts or play therapy since the child is already an expert at play and, given permission, will take off. The adult, in relation to the child, merely has to be willing to take up the meanings that are owned and expressed by the child by following her lead.

Expressive art endeavors enjoy some commonality with narrative construction. The expression of problems with coping resources in art form is inherently akin to the practice of externalization. The form of externalization or personalizing is "using the problem in a more subject-way."

Drawing, sculpting, or dramatizing the relationship with a live problem or situation naturally evokes an internal sense that the problem is located outside the person, such as using a language of the “putting-outside-type.” This may be beneficial in itself to place the locus of the conflict “outside” the child. A child can breathe a sigh of relief to express the externalized problem in a symbolic yet physically-experienced way. Now one can see the problem not inside their identity but to reflect on the conflict from the outside. Children, if given their own way to play, like to work and re-work stories in different forms such as drawing or theater rather than just talking about it.

Stories using expressive modalities, the child’s creativity and back-and-forth contingencies express problems in intersubjective ways using another person. They will attempt to bring together each other’s parts into a whole so that a brand new idea might be born. An example of this may be that “the critic” within a child is personified, drawn, and brought into a more agreeable relationship with each other. Similar benefits result from the artistic expression of lived experience utilizing the practice of externalization.



Creating Their Own Vocabulary

Children are invited to make meaning of their own expressions using the listeners, such as caregivers and parents, as the listeners employ their own curiosity, warm regard, and empathy. This facilitates the expansion of preferred meanings for the child from their back-and-forth exchanges rather than offering a so-called “expert opinion” on the child’s artistic vocabulary.

Performing a “new meaning” or by enacting parts of a story may lead to coauthoring of alternative stories. This idea takes on new dimensions in the context of expressive arts. The “performance” of a new meaning or story can include other realms of expression, for example, sensory, motor, and fantasy. These new realms of expression will thicken and make the new experience more compelling. This might offer a way to look at the picture differently with a new

context of communication. A child may draw herself “as the problem would see her” and then as she would prefer to be seen in a different, more preferred way.



Communication at the Heart of Expression

Children expressing themselves in art may inherently reinforce healing. The process of artful creation from one’s experiences is regarded as valuable communication instead of the main focus being on technical or artistic merit. The expressive arts combined with coauthoring narratives with children will invite a child into alternative forms of expression.

Using one’s creative instincts and interests, the senses can be employed in a way that enriches the experience. This model can be loosely applied in the context of story production. A particular memory can be reflected on by writing a poem or short story. This, in turn, is given more reflection in the child reading about oneself on the vocabulary she uses.

Story production could take form in a special project for the performance of meaning. This could include a videotape documentary of a child’s or family’s preferred story including interviews, witnessing, anecdotes, a poem, symbolic drawings, paintings, clay images, or movement in dance and sports. Once different modalities of expression are taken into consideration for the child to communicate, the possibilities become endless for how feelings and experiences can be exchanged.

This writing is taken from Dean Lobovits, David Epston, Jennifer Freeman, and their web site production at

http://www.narrativeapproaches.com/narrative%20papers%20folder/art_therapy.htm and modified for our Building Stories. We appreciate the authors for their original ideas.